

Chinese Names And Beyond

I never gave my name a lot of thought until I immigrated to America.



It did not take me long to figure out it was not easy for Americans to pronounce my name; few Americans I know of got my name right the first time. During roll call at school, I have been called many different things by professors; I developed an active approach very quickly. Whenever I introduce myself to someone new, I always add that “Aihua”

is pronounced like the sound of State Iowa without the “O” for easy pronunciation and effortless remembrance. I think the pronunciation difficulty is one of the reasons some new Chinese immigrants pick up English names soon after they settle in this country. I completely understand that approach, although it is kind of strange to talk to a “John” or a “Sara” who barely speak English. For me, this name “Aihua” is part of my identity, it is going to stick with me until Jesus takes me home.

For the most part, a Chinese name is just like any name in the west, that is, it shows the family name and a given name. But the order of the names is different from English; in China we put the last name before the given name. For example, my last name is Cai(蔡), my given name is Aihua(霏華); I am called Cai Aihua(蔡霏華) in Chinese. In modern China, a woman is not accustomed to taking her husband’s last name after marriage, instead she keeps her own to demonstrate equality with her spouse. Instead, I adopted the American way in order to embrace the oneness of marriage: I am known as Aihua Yin here in the US.

For Chinese, the given name is not just a simple tag, there is much more you can discover about one’s family simply by studying the name. The table below lists the names of my siblings, we all have “Hua” in our names. As a matter of fact, all children of my generation in the Cai family have “Hua” in their given names. Parents often lookup the family tree to find the “generation character” for their children. This practice ensures whenever I meet a remote kinsman of Cai, by studying the name I

am able to distinguish his or her generation seniority in relation to mine. So, I might be a great-great aunt to someone much older than me; or a lucky boy could be my grand uncle!

	Given Names	Meanings
My older sister	麗華 Li Hua	麗 Li : beautiful, bright
me	霏華 Ai Hua	霏 Ai : overcast, hazy
My younger brother	旭華 Xu Hua	旭 Xu : dawn, rising sun

Not everyone counts the seniority in a family or keeps a family tree, it is especially true after the Culture Revolution which aimed to smash up all “starchy” traditions. For some, the tradition may have been lost long ago; even though parents who have more than one child tend to pick the same character as part of all their children’s names. Such a character often has nothing to do with

the family tree, it is a practice without knowing the origin. For some, it is a decisive choice. My husband's given name is "Gu En", and his older brother "Li En". The character "En" has nothing to do with any Yin generation, it means "grace from God". For his parents, the names written on the "Book of Life" weight much more than the rank order of generations.

Like proud parents from all cultures, Chinese parents have fun selecting names for their children. Names from the same family often keep a theme. Looking at the table above, you will notice our names are related to the weather. My parents claimed that I was born on a stormy day, that was why my name is so "cloudy". Sometime I wonder how true that was. As a middle child, I need constant reassurance, since the first born was always "bright and beautiful", regardless of the weather. I remember when my grandma told us that my father did not speak with my mother for the first few days after my birth because every sign pointed to my birth as a BOY. Just maybe the "overcast" was more than just weather. After more than six years of yearning for a son, my baby brother was born -- what a cheerful addition! It must be more than a coincidence that he was named "rising sun...".



What about an only child? Does he or she miss all the fun? Not if he or she was born in the Imperial time before the last Dynasty collapsed. Many Chinese scholars or elites chose a Courtesy name after they reached to the age of 20. Courtesy name was the name one decides on one's OWN, since one had reached adulthood, and it often expressed one's moral and/or spiritual desires.

To respect your choice, adults of your own generation would call you by your courtesy name, your given name would be reserved only to your parents. You definitely come across courtesy names when you read classic Chinese literature, such as in the book of The Romance of Three Kingdoms, where the King of Shu was named Liu *Bei* (备, meaning "prepared" or "ready"), his courtesy name was *XuanDe* (玄德, meaning "heavenly virtue"). It was exactly the "virtue" he demonstrated led him to the throne. Talking about confusion and frustration for foreigner readers: both his given and courtesy names appeared in the book depending on who was talking with him, and imagining there were more than 1000 characters appeared in the 120 chapters of this Chinese Masterpiece!

How I wish I could live back in time, then my courtesy name would have been "Bright Rising Moon"! The only unfortunate thing, however, is that I still would not be a man. In bygone days, the social status of a woman was overtly lower than a man. Women, in general, did not have meaningful names. For example, the mother of Mao Zedong, the leader of Chinese Communist party from 1949-1976, was from common stock, living in the countryside. Her given name was Qi Mei(七妹), which means "the seventh daughter", for she was simply a girl born seventh in the order in their household! So, it has been a long way, but women in modern China, in general, are treated equally to men, although a boy is still more desirable in many families. Thus, I should be grateful for the time in which I live. Although it is too late to pick up a courtesy name, and my name is sort of depressing and gloomy, I celebrate for a very real name as a woman. "Aihua" has given me a unique identity.

So next time, when you meet a Chinese, ask about his or her name. Ask what it means. I think it is a much more meaningful way to start a conversation, much better than chitchat about weather, at least. Just make sure to be ready to explain your name, too.

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